

week by the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution.

The report, *Chemicals in Products: Safeguarding the Environment and Human Health*, warned that only 40 of the more than 30 000 synthetic chemicals currently available on the UK market have been subjected to a systematic risk assessment. The commission recommended substituting hazardous chemicals with safer, "greener" alternatives. Slow and inefficient toxicity tests in animals should be abandoned. Chemicals should be assessed using new computational technologies, already widely used by the pharmaceutical industry.

A list of all chemicals on the market should be published on the internet and made available to the public, the commission suggested. This should be linked to information on bioaccumulation and toxicity so the list could develop into a database.

Nick Smallwood *Tunbridge Wells*
Tessa Richards *BMJ*

Chemicals in Products: Safeguarding the Environment and Human Health (24th report) is available on the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution's website (www.rcep.org.uk).

Aid agency to tackle disease in the developing world

The quest for drugs to fight the world's most neglected tropical infectious diseases gained fresh momentum with the formal launch of the "drugs for neglected diseases" initiative this week.

Médecins Sans Frontières has teamed up with five international public organisations to promote affordable and effective drugs against leishmaniasis, human African trypanosomiasis, and Chagas' disease, among other infections that affect millions of people across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The charity has pledged \$25m (£15m; €22m) for the initiative until 2008. It will also seek funding from governments, private donors, and drug companies to raise \$255m over the next 12 years. The initiative has set a tar-

get of making available six to eight drugs for a range of neglected diseases over the next decade.

"Candidate drugs to combat neglected diseases might be sitting on the shelves of drug companies," said Dr Nirmal Kumar Ganguly, director general of the Indian Council of Medical Research, a partner in the initiative. He said clinical trials have shown that miltefosine and paromomycin—drugs developed by Western drug companies—work against leishmaniasis. The initiative also plans to introduce two fixed dose combinations for chloroquine resistant malaria within the next three to six years. Ganapati Mudur *New Delhi*

Report calls for better evaluation of pharmacogenetic tests

The marketing of pharmacogenetic tests may be moving much faster than the underlying medical science, warns a study published this week.

"There is widespread recognition that pharmacogenetics may have been oversold... The basic science is still substantially uncertain," argues its author, David Melzer, and colleagues from the department of public health and primary care at the University of Cambridge. Funded by the Wellcome Trust, the study was based on interviews and focus groups involving key experts on pharmacogenetics and major stakeholders in the United States and the United Kingdom.

The authors found a widespread view that genetic tests have great potential to improve the safety and effectiveness of an individual patient's drug treatment but considered that regulatory agencies should require mandatory clinical evaluation of these tests for the promise to be realised. They argued that "media excitement about genetic applications may be exaggerating investment and research activity" in pharmacogenetics.

Ray Moynihan *Washington, DC*

My Very Own Medicine: What Must I Know? is available at www.phpc.cam.ac.uk/epg/IPP.html

Deadly radiation ignored in Iraq

Peter Moszynski *London*

Villages surrounding Iraq's nuclear complex, Tuwaitha, just south of Baghdad, are contaminated with "deadly radiation" yet remain off limits to international inspectors, claims Greenpeace.

"The occupying forces have so far refused to allow the United Nations' nuclear experts, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to carry out proper documentation and decontamination in Iraq," said a Greenpeace spokesperson. "The US authorities in Baghdad have insisted on retaining responsibility for protecting human health but consistently deny there is a risk to the local population. Our team has only been surveying for eight days and has discovered frightening levels of radioactive contamination. The agency must be allowed to return with a full mandate to monitor and decontaminate."

On 24 June Greenpeace researchers presented a canister of uranium oxide (known as yellow cake because of its colour) to US guards stationed at the plant. They claim that the canister—"the size of a small car"—contained significant quantities of radioactive yellow cake and had been dumped on open ground near the Tuwaitha plant. Despite military personnel being aware of its presence, local people told researchers that the canister had been left open and unattended for three weeks.

Greenpeace said the agency has been barred from monitoring or doing health follow up and has only been given access

to one of 12 looted radiological sites. It maintains: "The coalition is in material breach of Resolution 1441 by refusing the IAEA 'immediate, unimpeded, unconditional, and unrestricted access to any and all, including underground, areas, facilities, buildings, equipment, records, and means of transport which they wish to inspect.'"

Confronted with both the canister and the initial findings of Greenpeace's survey, the head of the US Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventative Medicine, Lieutenant Colonel Mark Melanson, spoke out against continued obstruction of the UN inspectorate.

"I would recommend that the International Atomic Energy Agency and the World Health Organization get involved and do an assessment. The faster it happens the better."

Greenpeace says that surveyors found radioactivity in a series of houses (including one source measuring 10 000 times the normal level) and outside a primary school (measuring 3000 times the normal level). They also found a smaller radioactive source abandoned in a nearby field and discovered that some locals are still storing radioactive barrels and lids in their houses. The Greenpeace surveyors also heard consistent and repeated stories of unusual sickness after coming into contact with material from the Tuwaitha plant and found several objects carrying radioactive symbols discarded in the community. □



Iraqi children sleep outside the gates of the nuclear facility in Tuwaitha, 12 miles south of Baghdad